



"mother's distraction..."

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mother's distraction. Who would have thought old men needed to be cautioned too; told and warned against seeing, smelling or even hearing Wild?

She lived close, they said, not way off in the woods or even down in the riverbed, but somewhere in that canefield--at its edge some said or maybe moving around in it. Close. Cutting cane could get frenzied sometimes when young men got the feeling she was just yonder, hiding, and probably looking. One swing of the machete could lop off her head if she got sassy or too close, and it would be her own fault. That would be when they cut bad--too high up on the stalk or raggedy. Just thinking about her, whether she was close or not, could mess up a whole morning's work.

The grandfathers, way past slashing but still able enough to bind stalks or feed the sugar vats, used to be thought safe. That is until Hunters Hunter got tapped on the shoulder by fingertips that couldn't be anybody's but hers. When he snapped up, he saw the cane stalks shuddering but he didn't hear a single crack.

Because he was more used to wood life than tame, he knew when the eyes watching him were up in a tree, behind a knoll or, like this, at ground level. You can see how he was confused: the fingertips at his shoulder, the eyes at his feet. First thing came to mind was the woman he named himself, some twenty years ago because, after tending her, that was the word he thought of: Wild. He was sure he was tending a sweet young girl back then, but when she bit him, he thought, O, she's wild. Some things are like that. There's no gain fathoming more.

He remembered her laugh, though, and how peaceful she was in the beginning, so the touch of her fingertips didn't frighten him, but it did make him sad. Too sad to report the sighting to his co-workers, old men like himself no longer able to cut all day. Unwarned, they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her and for how trembly their legs got hearing that baby-girl laugh. The pregnant girls marked their babies or didn't, but the grandfathers--unwarned--went soft in the

head, walked out of the fields, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of their grown children and where they'd put their razor strops.

When Hunters Hunter, knew her--tended her--she was sweet but touchy. Touchy and a bit stuck on that City man. To see the two of them together was a regular surprise: the city man with his head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool. If the he had handled it right, maybe she would have stayed in the house, learned how to dress and talk to folks. He thought she was dead. Local people used the story of her to caution children and pregnant girls and it saddened him to learn that instead of resting, she was hungry still. Though for what, exactly, he couldn't say, less it was for that city man with hair the color of his name.

The old man didn't tell, but the news got out anyway: Wild was not a used-to-be-woman whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hard-headed

children. She was out there--for real. Someone saw Hunters Hunter jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the canefield, he murmured loud enough to hear, "Wild. Dog me, if it ain't Wild." The pregnant girls just sighed at the news and went on sweeping and sprinkling the dirt yards, and the young men sharpened their blades til the edges whistled. But the old men started dreaming. Like Hunter, they remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and that city man she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the city man. The first wasn't Hunter who was off on some long trek looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Patty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on Hunter's place while he was gone, and on one of the days he stopped by--to do a little weeding maybe and see if the chickens were still alive--it had rained all morning. Sheets of it made afternoon rainbows everywhere. Later he told his mother that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, and Honor looked at

his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, he thought a ghost had taken over the place. Then he realized he was looking at a whiteman and never believed otherwise, even when the proof was there for all the world to see.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting these buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of statues. Below is shadow where any blase' thing takes place: clarinets and lovensaking, fists and the voices of victorious women. A city like this one makes me dress tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel roofing above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream and copper halls of apartment buildings, it's strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible--like the City in 1936 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the bad stuff. The bad stuff. The things nobody could help stuff. The way everybody was then and there.